

“What Serves You”: Charting Black Girl Spaces for Wellness through Spirituality, Resistance, and Homeplace

MISHA N. INNISS-THOMPSON *

Cornell University

SHERETTA T. BUTLER-BARNES

Washington University in St. Louis

CLAUDINE TAAFFE

Vanderbilt University

TAQIYYAH ELLIOTT

Vanderbilt University

Abstract

This qualitative study uses photovoice to illuminate the descriptions and visualizations of mental health and wellness provided by 18 Black girls (15–18 years old). Participants captured images of people, places, and symbols that represented being mentally healthy. Photos were used to elicit responses during semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using an iterative, flexible coding approach, which put the data in conversation with Black girl cartography, a conceptual framework highlighting the importance of places and spaces supporting Black girls. Our analyses suggest that participants defined mental health as dealing with emotions, feeling stable/at peace, coping with stressors, and being shaped by the external environment. Further, their wellness was facilitated by spirituality, resistance, and community. Findings suggest the intentional use of photography and participatory methodologies produce rich, grounded narratives that can contribute to a holistic understanding of Black girls’ mental health and wellness.

Keywords: Black girls, wellness, photovoice

Introduction

In the United States, Black girls grow up in contexts where gendered anti-Blackness is ubiquitous (Lindsey, 2018; Smith-Purviance, 2021). Black girls are regularly exposed to attacks on their personhood within and outside of schools, ranging from mundane (e.g., adultification and school discipline) to spectacular (e.g., physical, verbal, and sexual assault) forms of violence (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Harris & Kruger, 2020; Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Morris, 2016). Gendered anti-Blackness in schools can negatively impact Black girls' health, safety, and socioemotional outcomes (e.g., Crenshaw et al., 2015; Leary, 2019; National Black Women's Justice Institute, 2021). Amid violence, Black girls find ways to thrive in imaginative and physical spaces that center their ways of knowing and privilege their emotionality (Butler, 2018; McArthur & Lane, 2019). Within and beyond school settings, spaces dedicated to Black girls' ways of knowing can offer insight into how Black girls make sense of the world around them and create worlds that prioritize their wellness.

This study aimed to illuminate the descriptions and visualizations of mental health and wellness of 18 Black adolescent (15–19 years old) girls. To uplift Black girls' voices, we used photovoice as the central methodological approach. Participants captured images of people, places, and symbols representing being mentally healthy and well. Photos were then used to elicit responses during semi-structured interviews, during which participants described their interpretation and perspectives of mental health and wellness. Data were analyzed using a flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2018; Saldaña, 2021), which put the data in conversation with Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018), a conceptual framework highlighting the importance of places and spaces that support Black girls. Findings inform recommendations for researchers and practitioners to support Black girls in creating spaces that support their wellness within and outside oppressive geopolitical systems and contexts.

We use the term *wellness* to denote a holistic, agentic, and asset-focused approach that directly contrasts with traditionally deficit-oriented and medicalized conceptualizations of mental health (Swarbrick, 2006). Based on Maparyan's conception, wellness "is understood as encompassing physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and environmental dimensions. It is a subjective state of energetic integrity and vitality that is independent of, yet facilitated by, external conditions" (Maparyan, 2012, p. 44). Wellness is facilitated by engaging in behaviors that support health and life satisfaction (Swarbrick, 2006). Focusing on wellness offers an opportunity to view Black girls' socioemotional selves regarding how they experience joy, fulfillment, and health in a world that oppresses them.

Creating Safe Spaces for Black Girls' Wellness

Empirical research on Black girls' socioemotional development has primarily focused on mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety symptoms (e.g., Stokes et al., 2020; Winchester et al., 2021). While this is one lens through which to understand Black girls' socioemotional development, such an approach fails to address the interconnected nature of Black girls' social, emotional, and spiritual wellness. According to Substance Abuse and Mental

Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2016), social wellness highlights the need for healthy relationships with friends, family, and community members. Emotional wellness refers to “the ability to express feelings, adjust to emotional challenges, cope with life’s stressors, and enjoy life” (SAMHSA, 2016, p. 21). Finally, spiritual wellness is indicated by “having meaning, purpose, and a sense of balance and peace” (SAMHSA, 2016, p. 15).

Several scholars have highlighted the importance of creating physical spaces where Black girls can feel socially and emotionally well (Nunn, 2018; Nyachae & Ohito, 2019; Rogers & Butler-Barnes, 2021). Black girls are heterogeneous, and the spaces created with and for them must be committed to imagining Black girlhood outside of respectability politics, which upholds White, hetero-, and cis-normative ideals of femininity (Nyachae & Ohito, 2019). As such, scholarship on Black girl spaces has considered the ethos of spaces that view “Black girls [as] intrinsically whole” (Nyachae & Ohito, 2019, pp. 20–21). Spaces that affirm Black girls are characterized by (1) supportive relationships; (2) a “politicized ethic of care” (McArthur & Lane, 2019, p. 71) that affirms Black girls’ identity, knowledge, and cultural wisdom; (3) celebrating Black girls’ bodies and full range of emotions; and (4) exposure to critical frameworks to inform how Black girls understand the structural nature of intersectional oppression (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Nunn, 2018; Nyachae & Ohito, 2019).

For instance, Nunn (2018) examined the impact of gendered racism on mental health among Black girls (aged 8 to 13 years old) in an after-school program. Findings demonstrated that Black girls’ emotional wellness is often shaped by gendered racism, which can influence their expectations of who they should be and how they express themselves. Girls in the study were striking a balance between being strong (suppressing their emotions) and being sad (acknowledging their full emotional selves). Further, Rogers and Butler-Barnes (2021) examined how attending an all-Black girls’ school influenced Black adolescent girls’ identity development. Findings revealed that being in community with other Black girls and women supported Black girls’ ability to feel seen and heard in school. Taken together, research on the ethos and impact of Black girl spaces illuminates the impact these spaces have on Black girls’ social and emotional wellness. Given the harsh impacts of gendered anti-Blackness, school settings must shift from carceral and violent practices to co-constructing spaces (like youth-driven after-school programs) where Black girls can thrive and feel physically and psychologically safe (Love, 2016; Morris, 2019).

Black girls engage in spiritual practices as a way of knowing, creating, and being in community (Garner, 2021). *Black girl spirituality* is “a conscious acknowledgment of Black girls’ relation to the divine and/or invisible realm as sustaining all existence in the material and supernatural worlds” (Garner, 2019, p. 105). We leveraged Garner’s conceptualization of Black girl spirituality in this study by making space for Black girls to talk about the myriad ways that their spiritual practices shaped their overall wellness. The present study highlights the Black Girl Magic Crew (BGM) as a space that encouraged Black girls to be in community with each other in ways that supported and held room for their social, emotional, and spiritual wellness. Black

girl cartography is a conceptual framework that acknowledges space and place's role in shaping Black girls' wellness.

Conceptual Framework: Black Girl Cartography

The current study is framed by Black girl cartography, a praxis-oriented framework focused on “how and where Black girls are physically and sociopolitically mapped in education” at the intersections of race, gender, age, place, and space (Butler, 2018, p. 29). This framework merges intersectionality (Bilge, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989, 1990) and Black feminist geographies (McKittrick, 2006) to propel a more critical examination of the intersectional oppression that occurs within places—such as schools—that Black girls navigate daily.

In the context of this study, Black girl cartography offers a critical lens through which we amplify Black girls' epistemological contributions to mental health and wellness literature. Black girl cartography unapologetically centers Black girls as theorizers of their lived experiences. Further, this framework highlights school as a geopolitical space where “[Black] girls are epistemically and physically excluded from notions of girlhood” (Butler, 2018, p. 36). Black girl cartography is concerned with how Black girls navigate oppressive geopolitical places (e.g., schools) and create spaces where they can feel safe, included, and liberated (Cahill, 2019). In this paper, we are similarly interested in Black girls' resistance to intersectional oppression within schools and the importance of their agency in creating spaces that uphold their social, emotional, and spiritual wellness. Next, we highlight photovoice as a methodological tool to center Black girls' epistemologies.

Using Photovoice to Foreground Black Girls' Epistemologies

Photovoice centers participants' voices and perspectives by using photographs and critical group dialogue as tools to identify, represent, and enhance participants' lived experiences (Wang, 2006). Photovoice has three main goals: (1) recording and reflecting community strengths and concerns; (2) promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about prominent issues through group discussion of photographs; and (3) reaching policymakers (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). In this study, photovoice was a tool for Black girls to share how they visualize what being mentally well looks like in the spaces they occupy and the memories they deem worthy of capturing on camera. Black girls engaged in cartographic work by using photography to construct their stories and perceptions of wellness. Using Black girl cartography as a conceptual tool coupled with photovoice and semi-structured interviews honors Black girls' ways of knowing by centering what wellness means to them.

The Current Study

To move the field of Black girlhood forward, scholars, practitioners, and Black girls themselves must shed light on how Black girls experience and describe mental health and wellness. Furthermore, using photovoice as a participatory approach makes space for Black girls to reflect on and record their lived experiences. Consequently, our research was guided by three primary questions: (1) How do Black girls describe mental health and wellness? (2) What does

being well look like for Black girls? (3) What physical and imaginative spaces do Black girls carve out to maintain a sense of wellness? Data were collected within the context of an after-school program, the BGM. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to complement the photovoice data and served as an opportunity to explore Black girls' individual experiences with mental health and wellness.

Method

This photovoice project was part of a larger qualitative study examining how Black girls' experiences in schools, communities, and families impacted their mental health.

Research Setting: The Black Girl Magic Crew

In the spring of 2018, the first author co-created an after-school program, the BGM, alongside four Black girls at Magnolia High School (an urban magnet high school located in the Southeastern United States). The BGM emerged out of the necessity to honor the collective needs and desires of Black high school girls at Magnolia High. One girl articulated that these needs and desires included “needing Black women and men as mentors, not just in academics, but also in life.” As a result, the principal contacted the first author to develop a support group for Black girls at Magnolia. BGM meetings took place within the school building (in the college counseling room, a location girls could easily access), yet outside of the school day (from 3:15 p.m. to 4:45 p.m., twice a month).

The program aimed to nurture the talent, knowledge, and growth of Black girls through discussions and activities focused on identity development, mental health and wellness, literacy and arts, and college and career preparation. The BGM engaged a group of Black adolescent girls in their sophomore year through high school graduation across 3 academic years. The girls' interests primarily drove the program's structure and content: they named the group, constructed community norms, and decided on the topics we discussed. In the BGM, Black girls designed and forged a space in which they developed a Black-girl centered environmental ethos.

Participants

Participants were a purposive convenience sample of Black girls aged 15–18 years old (see Table 1) who had participated in the BGM at Magnolia High School, either as current participants ($n = 15$) or recent graduates ($n = 3$). Of the 24 girls contacted, 18 elected to participate in this study. Magnolia High School is situated within an urban, majority-White (55.4%), middle-class (median income \cong \$60,000) community. At the time of data collection, the school had a student body of approximately 950 students, of which 10% were Asian, 42% Black/African American, 6% Hispanic/Latinx, and 40% White.

Table 1*Participant Demographics and Mental Health Descriptions*

Name and age	Description of self	Definition of mental health
Aaliyah, 18	Motivation-driven, loving, caring	“Healing, growth, things of that nature. ... Because with mental health ... it’s ever changing, and it allow[s] you to move forward and grow as a person.”
Amanda, 16	Introvert, observer	“Mental health. I always think about being stable. Being stable in your day-to-day life. Being happy with who you are, where you are in life. Not having intruding thoughts. I think people’s environment really affects their mental health. So having an environment where you’re not constantly criticized or brought down by people who can’t figure their own lives out.”
Amani, 16	Observant	“Periodic breaks, I guess. Like step backs.”
Ashley, 18	Funny, outgoing, confident	“being able to handle your emotions effectively... Being able to feel it, acknowledge what that feeling is, where it’s coming from, and being able to deal with it to where it ... to where you can kind of have peace with it.”
Ayanna*, 16	Introverted, independent, intelligent, beautiful	“Even when you’re not happy, understanding that it’s going to get better. ... That even if something you, I guess the first step is realizing that something is wrong and that it can get better. Mental health, I don’t know, your mind, your thought process, how you’re feeling.”
Ayanna*, 17	A 17-year-old Black girl from [redacted] who is intelligent, well intended, and a visionary.	“Being comfortable, being stable, and happy.”
Brandy, 18	Free-spirited, spiritual, compassionate, empath	“Peace of mind, like clarity. The ability for your mind not to be so weighed down that you can’t make logical decisions.”

Brianna, 17	Wordy, quirkily dressed, strong, open, everyone's advocate	"Developing healthy habits that really, um. ... It's, it's learning how to, like, treat yourself better and, like, through treating yourself better, you end up treating other people a lot better."
Carla, 18	Funny, smart, strong, independent	"Personally, when I feel mentally healthy, I feel like there's stability in my life. I don't have to worry about things going left. I know that things are going straight."
Gaby, 15	Short, funny, goofy, mean, caring, respectful, hardworking, nice if earned	"How you feel when you're by yourself and just sitting, like how you feel. ... If I could describe my ideal mental health, if I'm just sitting here not doing nothing, I want to be able to feel at peace and happiness without my mind going other places."
Jennifer, 18	<i>Not provided</i>	"How a person is feeling, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, and how it's affecting them."
Joy, 18	Social, artsy, loyal, caring, trustworthy, leader	"Healing, growth. Things of that nature. Because with mental health, I feel like it's ever changing, and it allows you to move forward and grow as a person."
Keisha, 16	Energetic, kind	"I think mental health is kinda this space that dictates how we live and dictates how we make our decisions. And it can fluctuate and can cycle."
Melanie, 18	<i>Not provided</i>	"Mental health ... I would consider it like this state of mind, when your state of mind is in equilibrium, like, 'cause you can really put, say, positive mental health or negative mental health, but mental health in itself is, your mind is at equilibrium."
Mya, 17	Quiet, reserved, observant	"Mental health, I just think about just people's emotions. That's all I think about."
Natalie, 17	<i>Not provided</i>	"How healthy you are, how healthy your mind is. How good are you at handling certain situations."
Sadé, 18	Creative, intelligent, open-minded, logical	"Emotional well-being and psychological well-being too."

Tiffany, 15	Resilient, educated, kind, and caring	“Mental health is what kind of environment you’re in and how you feel about the environment. ... So, I would probably say mental health is your community and what you surround yourself with.”
Toni, 15	Creative	“Mental health, I just think about just people’s emotions. [It’s] kind of ongoing, kind of stressful, kind of a lot. It’s just too much. It’s too much.”

Note. All names used as pseudonyms. Ayanna was the only participant who was part of the project for both cohorts.

Procedure

All procedures and materials were approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board and the school district’s Office of Research and Evaluation. Data collection occurred across two cohorts during January to May 2020 ($n = 13$) and January to May 2021 ($n = 5$). We drew on Black feminist qualitative methodology (Evans-Winters, 2019) and photovoice (Latz, 2017; Wang, 2006) to collect and analyze (1) participant-generated descriptions of their photos and (2) transcripts from semi-structured interviews. Consistent with a photovoice approach, we foregrounded Black girls’ expertise by considering how they collectively made sense of their photos.

Photovoice

We adapted the phases of photovoice as outlined by Latz (2017) and Wang (2006), which include: (a) problem identification; (b) education about the photovoice process; (c) having participants take photos in response to the prompts (documentation); (d) meaning-making during facilitated discussions (narration); (e) data analysis; and (f) dissemination. Each participant was asked to take 25 photos (using either a 35-mm disposable camera [Cohort 1] or cell phone camera [Cohort 2]) over 3 weeks. The girls were asked to capture images of people, places, and symbols that represented any of the following four themes: (1) being mentally healthy; (2) community; (3) love; and (4) being a Black girl growing up in their city. This study focuses on responses to the prompt about what represented being mentally healthy.

At the end of the 3 weeks, participants either turned in their disposable cameras to the researchers for film development or uploaded their photos to a secure Box folder. Participants selected three photos to share with the group and contextualized them using the PHOTO technique (Graziano, 2004) to elicit responses: “What is the title of your photo? How would you describe this picture? What is *happening* in this picture? Why did you take a picture of this? What does this picture *tell* us about your life? And how can this picture provide *opportunities* for us to improve life?” The researchers used these questions to facilitate a group discussion with each cohort about their photos. During group dialogues, the first author projected the photos as

each participant shared with other participants what their photographs meant to them (Wang, 2006).

Interviews

After taking photos and providing descriptions, each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interviews were facilitated by a Black woman (either the first author or fourth author) and were securely conducted online using Zoom. Interviews lasted between 40 and 115 minutes ($M = 89$ min). All interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and cleaned to ensure transcription accuracy. Participants were compensated \$25 for participating in the semi-structured interview.

Data included in this article come from a series of questions about mental health, including: “When you hear the term mental health, what comes to mind? How would you define it?”; “If you remember, could you tell me about how you learned to handle your mental health? What conversations or memories stand out to you?”; and “What’s one thing [or person, resources, etc.] that helps you when you’re feeling down or stressed out? What makes it helpful?”

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018) using an iterative, flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). We begin by describing the process for analyzing the interview transcripts and then describe the process for analyzing the photo descriptions.

Interview Transcripts

Our analysis of the interview transcripts occurred in four phases: (1) exploring and preparing the data, (2) applying analytic codes, (3) developing themes, and (4) reviewing themes (Deterding & Waters, 2018). In Phase 1, data exploration and preparation, the first author read through the interview transcripts and then applied index codes (which represented the broad categories pursued in the larger research project) as a tool for data reduction and later retrieval (Deterding & Waters, 2018). Applying index codes enabled the research team to quickly locate specific areas of the transcripts focused on mental health and wellness. Each question in the semi-structured interview protocol was included as an index code. For instance, the interview question “When you hear the term mental health, what comes to mind? How would you define it?” was coded as “defining mental health.” This approach yielded three index codes relevant to this manuscript: “defining mental health,” “describing own mental health,” and “resources for handling mental health.” After generating index codes, we aggregated the codes by broader topic such that all responses to questions focused on the participants’ mental health were assigned the index code “mental health.”

Phase 2, applying analytic codes, consisted of coding the interview transcripts using first- and second-cycle coding approaches to synthesize the data (Saldaña, 2021). The coding team (first and fourth authors) read through all relevant interview excerpts and engaged in two types

of first-cycle coding: descriptive and in vivo coding to summarize data segments using words or short phrases (Saldaña, 2021). This coding process yielded 48 unique codes (e.g., “effectively handling emotions” and “how healthy your mind is”). The codes were grouped into larger categories based on how the codes related to one another. For instance, “effectively handling emotions” and “how you’re feeling” were aggregated into “feelings and emotions.”

Phases 3 and 4, developing and refining themes, consisted of using theoretical coding to collapse categories into broader themes and concepts. We employed Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018) as a critical analytic perspective to explore the physical and imaginative spaces Black girls carved out to maintain a sense of wellness. Consistent with the framework, we were committed to examining how Black girls resist intersectional oppression (*navigational practices*) and are agentic in creating spaces that uphold their wellness (*charting spaces*) throughout the transcripts and photo descriptions.

Photos and Photo Descriptions

The photovoice data consisted of over 300 photos and 30 photo descriptions. Participants provided descriptions of their three favorite photos. The selected photos offered a visual depiction of Black girls’ conceptions of mental health and wellness. Whereas participants interpreted the photos (by providing descriptions using the PHOTO method), the research team interpreted participants’ photo descriptions. The research team independently coded the photo descriptions using a four-phase process: (1) data familiarization, (2) open coding (to briefly summarize the descriptions using words or short phrases), (3) axial coding (to collapse codes into categories), and (4) data triangulation (considering the additional insight the photos could add to the interview transcripts). After reading through participants’ photo descriptions, we used descriptive and in vivo coding to summarize data segments using words or short phrases (Saldaña, 2021). The initial coding yielded 30 unique codes, such as “go with the flow” and “look to the future.” Next, we categorized codes that were similar to each other. For instance, the category “strategies for handling mental health” included codes such as “playing card games” and “spending time with family and friends.” Finally, we put the photo descriptions in conversation with participants’ interview transcripts. This triangulation approach helped animate and add texture to the experiences participants shared during the interviews.

Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, the research team engaged in reflexive journaling, documented the coding process, and conducted peer debriefing to make sense of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, using a photovoice approach enhanced credibility because the participants’ descriptions of their photos allowed us to accurately portray why they took the photos and how they related to their mental health and wellness (Latz, 2017). In addition, we triangulated the different qualitative sources of information (interview transcripts, photos, and photo descriptions) by comparing them with each other (Patton, 2014).

Positionality

As researchers, we recognize how we analyze and present the data is informed by our lived experiences, epistemologies, and sociopolitical identities (Evans-Winters, 2019). The authors consisted of two developmental psychologists (Misha and Sheretta), an African American studies scholar (Candy), and a divinity scholar (Taqiyyah), who share a commitment to centering Black girls' wellness and safety. The first author gained access to Magnolia High School as a graduate student at a local university. Over 3 years, she developed, co-facilitated, and assumed the role of participant-observer in the BGM. The second author lent her expertise as a developmental psychologist during research meetings and peer debriefing with the first author. The third and fourth authors were involved in co-facilitating BGM sessions and observing participants.

The first author and PI is a Black, cisgender, heterosexual woman from a Northern middle-class background. The first authors' research was guided by the epistemological belief that "Black girls know the answer to a world of questions, but no one is asking them the questions" (Finney, 2009, p. xx). The second author is a Black, cisgender, heterosexual woman from a lower-to-middle-class background whose lived experiences influence how she approaches writing about Black girls. She draws on Black girl cartography as a tool to understand and allow Black girls into spaces where they are safe and valued. The third author is a Black (Afro-Latina) woman from a lower-to-middle-class urban background. She believes the cacophony of ethnographic photographs Black girls take contributes to visual theory and a counternarrative to the stereotypes about Black girls in schools and communities. Finally, the fourth author identifies as a Black, cisgender, heterosexual woman from a middle-class Southern Christian background that influences her academic and advocacy approaches regarding Black girls' development. Grounded in womanist epistemologies and culturally relevant pedagogies, the fourth author leverages Black girl cartographies as a sociological, womanist praxis tool to create spaces for Black girls to provide oppositional narratives and experiences regarding their identity and bodily existence.

Findings

The Black girls' narratives provided insight into how they defined and experienced mental health and wellness. We noticed four themes in the girls' definitions of mental health: (1) dealing with emotions, (2) feeling stable/at peace, (3) coping with stressors, and (4) being shaped by the external environment. After exploring how Black girls defined mental health and wellness, we found that participants engaged in three types of rituals: (1) spirituality, (2) resistance, and (3) community with Black girls and women. Below, we elaborate on each theme with examples from the sample.

Descriptive Definitions of Mental Health and Wellness

We began each interview by asking Black girls how they defined mental health. Though the girls were explicitly asked about mental health, their definitions demonstrated a holistic understanding of the factors that shaped their ability to feel well. Black girls in this study defined

mental health in terms of dealing with emotions, feeling stable/at peace, coping with stressors, and being shaped by the external environment (see Table 2).

For instance, Jennifer (18 years old) defined mental health as “how a person is feeling mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, and how it is affecting them.” Her definition goes beyond the traditional understanding of mental health, which tends to use a medicalized approach that emphasizes symptomatology (Swarbrick, 2006). Instead, Jennifer shared that her understanding of mental health was informed by the interconnection between her mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. Her definition affirms the importance of considering the multidimensional domains of wellness and how they impact an individual’s sense of “energetic integrity and vitality” (Maparyan, 2012, p. 44).

Table 2

Summary of Themes with Representative Examples

Theme and definition	Example quote
Dealing with emotions refers to describing mental health in terms of navigating one’s feelings and emotions.	“To me, mental health would be being able to handle your emotions effectively. And by ‘effectively,’ meaning ... feeling however you feel if ... something happened to you, and it makes you feel sad or it makes you angry. Being able to feel it, acknowledge what that feeling is, where it’s coming from, and being able to deal with it to where it ... to where you can kind of have peace with it.” (Ashley)
Feeling stable/at peace refers to describing mental health as an internal state of peacefulness and harmony.	<p>“When I feel mentally healthy, I feel like there’s, like, stability in my life. Like, I don’t have to, like, worry about, like, like, things going left. I know that things are, like, going straight.” (Carla)</p> <p>“The first thing that comes to mind is peace of mind, like clarity. The ability for your mind not to be so weighed down that you can’t make logical decisions.” (Brandy)</p>
Shaped by external environment refers to describing mental health in terms of external environment (e.g., people, places).	“Mental health is what kind of environment you’re in and how you feel about the environment and if you want to change it because if you’re really unhappy with yourself, you can become depressed or you could be really doubting yourself and lose confidence, and that could be the spark of a mental health crisis. So, I would probably say mental health is your community and what you surround yourself with.” (Tiffany)
Coping with stressors refers to describing mental	“Mental health is ... developing, like, healthy habits. ... It’s learning how to treat yourself better and, like, through

health in terms of
navigating life's
stressors.

treating yourself better, you end up treating other people a lot
better.” (Brianna)

Tiffany (16 years old) brought up the role of social wellness, in terms of the external environment, in her ability to feel well. Tiffany defined mental health as the “kind of environment you’re in and how you feel about the environment and if you want to change it. ... So, I would probably say mental health is your community and what you surround yourself with.” Jennifer’s external surroundings directly impacted her mental health. Her assertion that community was central to her mental health corroborates previous literature on social connection and Black youth’s socioemotional outcomes (Rose et al., 2019).

Participants’ definitions of mental health also demonstrated the centrality of spiritual wellness. For example, Brandy (18 years old) shared that the first words that came to mind when thinking about mental health were “peace of mind, like clarity. The ability for your mind not to be so weighed down that you can’t make logical decisions.” Relatedly, Melanie (18 years old) described being mentally healthy as when “your mind is at equilibrium,” when one can balance positive and negative mental health in one’s day-to-day life. Brandy’s and Melanie’s definitions shed light on the critical role spiritual wellness, as indicated by having a sense of “balance and peace,” had in shaping their mental health (SAMHSA, 2016, p. 15).

Finding Wellness in Spirituality

“Building my relationship with God helped me manage my mental health.”

Several Black girls in the study recognized that their spiritual wellness facilitated their mental health. For example, when Keisha (17 years old) was asked about how she would describe her mental health, she described having a stable sense of spiritual wellness as the foundation that informed her wellness across various domains:

Keisha: I think *my mental health is connected to my spiritual health* and so depending on how that is day by day ... it always fluctuates, of course, but it’s always gonna be a constant. Something I can rely on and go back to, it never falters too low.

Interviewer: And how would you describe spiritual health?

Keisha: I think spiritual health is how much I’m reminded of and connected to God, I guess. And deepening my relationship, I guess that remembrance ... ‘cause *spirituality is kind of like the center of my life, and so as long as I remain in that center, then that kind of affects everything else* and it builds everything else.

For Keisha, spiritual health—a reminder of her connection to God—was a foundational part of her life. Later in the conversation, Keisha offered a concrete example of how her spiritual health helped her to navigate difficult times in her life by exposing her to messages focused on guidance, purpose, and perseverance. When asked about a specific message that resonated with her, Keisha shared the following:

A lot of the central things that we really talk about [in church] is how *God has a plan for us*. When I hear the pastor talking about how there's gonna be different types of seasons where there's a lot of uncertainty, but yet, that we serve a God that's still good and that is always gonna bring us to the other side of those [seasons] ... I think that also shows how even though people's lives have played out so differently, God always had the final say and ... fulfilled the purpose that he had for them. So, *I think that's really encouraging and very helpful for mental and spiritual health*.

Keisha resonated with messages that discussed how God would see her through seasons of uncertainty. Her description offered one illustration of the direct ways spiritual and mental health informed one another.

Sadé (18 years old) also described how her identity as a spiritual person impacted her ability to stay grounded and manage her depression:

I'm a Christian. So, I guess just *building my relationship with God helped me manage my mental health and depression and things like that*. So, I think it's important. I'm not saying you necessarily have to be spiritual, but I think it's helpful if you kind of have that person you kind of look to and be, like, "Oh, well, I am here and I was put here for a purpose. So, maybe, I know, stay here a little bit longer" and things like that. *It kind of helps me feel more grounded* like maybe having devotionals every once in a while or meditating, things like they help you stay sane, especially with stressful times.

Sadé emphasized that building a relationship with God helped her manage her depression. Furthermore, having this sense of purpose, connection to the divine, and tools (e.g., devotionals and meditation) helped her feel grounded amidst stressful life experiences.

In addition to narratives, participants' photos offered an opportunity to visually see the connection between spiritual and emotional domains of wellness. For example, in her photo *What Serves You*, Ayanna (16 years old) burned sage to engage in a spiritual practice (see Figure 1). Her image demonstrated her commitment to learning about spiritual health and what she described as "engaging in practices that speak to the divine and are good for your mind and body." Further, Ayanna's decision to title the image *What Serves You* offers a revolutionary idea—for her to summon the divine as an entity that serves her—and disrupts traditional understandings of spirituality, which posit that people serve the divine. Instead, Ayanna asserts that Black girls deserve to be served, which to her included having practices that contributed to

her peace of mind. In this instance, burning sage offered Ayanna “a practice of self-care and love.” Ayanna’s image illustrates how important it is for Black girls to engage in practices and rituals that help them to feel well in the face of stressful situations.

Figure 1

What Serves You, by Ayanna (2020)



Ayanna described this picture as “a practice of self-care and love.” Ayanna shared the following about why she took the picture: “At the time I was reading about spiritual health as far as practicing gratitude and possessing good energy, and smudging is one of the things I learned about.”

Taken together, Black girls in this study recognized that mental health works in tandem with their spiritual wellness. Their descriptions are consistent with previous research identifying religious emotional support (within the religious community and within oneself by being in a relationship with God/higher power; Rose et al., 2021) and religiosity (having a relationship with God; Butler-Barnes et al., 2018) as critical mechanisms that support aspects of Black girls’ psychological well-being. In addition, Ayanna’s perspective supports Garner’s (2019) assertion that spirituality offers a way for “Black girls to exist within hegemonic systems and overcome them by imposing the power that exists within” (p. 119). Further, according to (Butler, 2021), Black girls use spirituality as a navigational practice through which they traverse worlds that regularly attempt to crush their humanity.

Wellness as Resistance

“Don’t feel guilty for taking a break even if it isn’t warranted by the ‘authority.’”

Participants like Ayanna and Toni engaged in what Butler (2018) called *navigational practices*, which Black girls use to resist oppressive geopolitical places and spaces by caring for one another and bringing their whole selves into the spaces they are navigating. In addition, participants made connections between their ability to engage in navigational practices and feeling well.

One year after submitting *What Serves You*, Ayanna (by then, 17 years old) participated in the second cohort of the project. Ayanna described herself as intelligent, well-intended, and a visionary. She captured *This or That* (Figure 2), a photo demonstrating her refusal to engage in places that did not serve her wellness. In this image, Ayanna is sitting atop a dryer outside reading *Grown* (a Black young adult novel that the BGM was reading). Ayanna’s description walks the reader through the journey from her draining virtual classroom to a reading break outside. Beyond feeling drained, Ayanna recognized that what she was learning was not information that was necessary for her to take in. When asked what the photo could tell us about her life, Ayanna stated:

I don’t really like school, especially since the pandemic. It has changed my perception of what reality is. It’s really stupid ... that I am doing school on a computer [during] a pandemic. [I] don’t feel like I am learning at all ... *I just decided that my teacher wasn’t talking about anything important, so I went outside instead.*

Ayanna decided that, rather than staying glued to a computer in a disengaging class, she would get to a book on her to-read list. She sought an escape from a place that did not support her wellness, sense of self, and visionary spirit. Instead, Ayanna chose to spend her time being wrapped in the life of a Black girl protagonist whose life journey she found fascinating. Consistent with research on Black girl literacies, Ayanna prioritized finding time to engage in “literacies of resistance” that affirmed her Black girlhood (Young et al., 2018).

Figure 2

This or That, *by Ayanna (2021)*



This image represents “reading a book outside on a warm and kinda windy day.” This photo was taken during the middle of the school day when Ayanna “just decided to leave the [Zoom-based class] and got outside. Got some sun and read a book that’s been on my list for a while.” Ayanna took the photo because she wanted to take a break.

Toni (a 15-year-old who described herself as curious) also offered an example of resisting the external expectations of displaying emotionality. She described that, in her family, she was taught it was not okay to express the full range of her emotions:

My family has a big thing on no crying. ... They like to express their emotions through loudness and anger. And I just don’t ... like doing that. I just like to cry. That’s just my thing. When I’m mad, I cry. When I’m sad, I cry. So, I just learned how to keep that in me until it gets to the point where it gets too bad and I just can’t help it. And then it becomes too much and becomes [this] whole mental crisis in there.

Though she tried to hold it in, Toni admitted that she had to let her sadness and anger out or risk experiencing what she called a “mental crisis.”

Brandy similarly described how Black girls are taught that their emotional selves are unimportant in schools. This is one reason why the BGM was a critical social space for her:

[The BGM] is an open place, a safe space, where you can just converse with other girls, they look like you, they might be from ... different walks of life, but what you all have in common is being a Black girl. ... You don't have to worry about somebody downplaying your emotions. [B]ecause you know ... *school systems, they don't like to really look at us in a way where we have feelings too, that matter.*

Consistent with Nunn's (2018) assertion of the importance of holding space for Black girls to express the full range of their emotions, Toni and Brandy offered examples of familial and school contexts attempting to quell their emotionality. Brandy's description of schools as spaces that discount Black girls' emotionality is aligned with recent scholarship focusing on emotion suppression (Lozada et al., 2021). Furthermore, Ayanna's photo and narrative demonstrate Black girls' agency to create affirming spaces and speak to their multidimensionality (Price-Dennis et al., 2017). Taken together, Toni's, Brandy's, and Ayanna's narratives highlight the utility of critical conversation spaces for Black girls (like the BGM), which offer a chance for them to engage in storytelling, feel connected and validated, and receive emotional support (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kelly, 2020b; McArthur & Lane, 2019).

Finding Wellness in Community with Others

"When in doubt, go with your friends."

Findings demonstrated that Black girls create physical and imaginative spaces that enable them to thrive, make meaning of the world around them, engage in community, and create visions for the future (Butler, 2018). Both physical and imaginative spaces offer Black girls what bell hooks (1992) described as a homeplace, wherein "[d]espite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's home place was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist" (p. 384). We offer Toni's and Gaby's narratives as examples of how Black girls leveraged their homeplace as a site where they could feel well.

Toni (introduced earlier) captured *The Release* (see Figure 3) during her family's annual grieving ritual. In contrast to Toni's earlier admission that her family taught her to suppress sadness, *The Release* illustrates one context in which her family gathered with the intention of feeling deeply. Toni described her photo as follows:

Every time someone in my family dies, we have a balloon release to give them a message of love. (My family is mainly women, so we have only done this for the women in our family so far.) And these events are very heartwarming whenever I go to one, even though we had a loss. I don't know about everyone but *being able to come back with family after every year of someone's passing is very good for my mental health.*

Toni's description offers additional insight into her family dynamic. In a family of primarily Black women, Toni was taught not to cry. As a result of being socialized to suppress

her emotions, Toni often bottled up her emotions until they could no longer be contained. Her family’s grieving ritual—releasing heart-shaped balloons in the air in memory of their deceased loved ones—offered a space where she and her family members could resist the desire to contain their emotions. In emotion-laden moments like these, Black girls and women can resist the constant expectation of being strong Black women (Geyton et al., 2020). Toni’s photo represents an attempt to resist emotion suppression in favor of being in a physical space where she and her family members could embrace their emotions as central to their humanity.

Figure 3

The Release, *by Toni (2021)*



This image depicts people releasing balloons as a celebration. When asked why she took this photo, Toni shared:

Every time someone in my family dies, we have a balloon release to give them a message of love. (My family is mainly women so we have only done this for the women in our family so far.) And these events are very heartwarming whenever I go to one even though we had a loss.

In this study, friends also helped to support Black girls’ social wellness. In *Party Time* (see Figure 4), Gaby (a 15-year-old who described herself as short, funny, goofy, mean, and caring) brings the viewer into a moment when she and her friends were at a party. When she took the photo, Gaby was experiencing what she called “a dark depression stage,” during which she isolated herself from others. However, Gaby’s friends were insistent: “my peoples dragged me to that party, and I was so happy that whole week.” As she reflected on the experience, Gaby shared that being around people positively impacted her mood. In her time of distress, she needed to be

around her friends. As Morrison (1987) wrote, true friends gather the pieces of you “and give them back ... in all the right order” (p. 227). In this case, the act of fellowshipping with her friends was enough to lift Gaby from her “dark depression stage.” Friends play a critical role in uplifting Black women and girls as they navigate life’s challenges and joys (Bryant-Davis, 2013; Leath et al., 2022). Narratives like Gaby’s extend these findings to consider friendships as a homeplace where Black girls can be their full selves (Goins, 2011; Kelly, 2020b).

Figure 4

Party Time, *by Gaby (2021)*



This image depicts “a bunch of feet,” which, Gaby thought “to most people would probably be confusing.” Gaby explained why she took this picture:

Because during that time I didn’t want to get out my bed at all, let alone be around people because I was in a dark depression stage but my peoples dragged me to that party, and I was so happy that whole week. I don’t regret going, and I would love to go to another one.

Discussion

Black girls navigate contexts where they are dehumanized and exposed to gendered anti-Blackness (Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Smith-Purviance, 2021). This violence can have deleterious impacts on their mental health and wellness. Nevertheless, amidst exposure to oppression, Black girls seek and create spaces that celebrate their full emotionality (McArthur & Lane, 2019). In

this paper, we used Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018) as a guiding framework to illuminate Black girls' descriptions and visual representations of mental health and wellness. In particular, this study focused on three questions: (1) How do Black girls define mental health and wellness? (2) How do they visualize being mentally well? (3) What physical and imaginative spaces do Black girls carve out to maintain a sense of wellness? Descriptive and visual data were drawn from a purposive sample of 18 Black girl adolescents participating in an after-school program at a high school in the Southeast United States.

Our first research question was concerned with how Black girls defined mental health. Participants' definitions of mental health demonstrated a holistic understanding of the factors shaping their ability to feel well. Black girls in this study defined mental health as dealing with emotions, feeling stable/at peace, coping with stressors, and being shaped by the external environment. Thus, future research would benefit from employing a womanist ethic to propel a more culturally attentive exploration of Black girls' wellness that prioritizes wellness as interconnected (Barlow & Dill, 2018; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Womanism is an embodied epistemology that centers the voices of Black women's and girls' lived experiences as a socio-religious and cultural critique of systems of power and oppression (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). Through its four core tenets—traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, radical subjectivity, and critical engagement—a womanist ethic can offer a mandate to center Black women's and girls' epistemologies in creating spaces and resources to sustain wellness.

The second research question considered photos and descriptions to examine how Black girls visualize what it looks like to be well. Analyzing the data revealed how Black girls visualized being well was directly informed by the third research question focused on the physical and imaginative spaces Black girls created to maintain a sense of wellness. Consequently, we addressed Research Questions 2 and 3 simultaneously. We interpreted three processes and practices that facilitated Black girls' wellness: (1) spirituality, (2) resistance, and (3) community.

In this study, spirituality laid the foundation to support many Black girls' wellness. However, while previous research has acknowledged the role of religiosity in promoting well-being among Black youths (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2021), few studies have considered spirituality a potential asset for Black girls. Our findings corroborate Garner's (2019) assertion that Black girls engage in spiritual practices through creativity and collectivity. Further, this study extends work demonstrating how Black youths use spirituality to protect them in dangerous/oppressive geopolitical places (Butler, 2021; Harley & Hunn, 2014). In line with a Black girl cartography framework, this study provides examples of how Black girls create imaginative spaces that allow them to be connected to the divine.

Resistance also informed Black girls' ability to feel well. This theme supports previous theoretical work highlighting resistance as a critical contributing factor to girls of color's positive youth development (Clonan-Roy et al., 2018). Findings demonstrate that Black girls create supportive spaces for themselves, even as they are tasked with navigating dehumanizing contexts such as schools. Black girls in the present study demonstrated their ability to engage in Black girl

literacies and create collective homeplaces wherein their full humanity and emotionality were prioritized (Lozada et al., 2021; Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Young et al., 2018).

Finally, Black girls' wellness was influenced by their ability to be in community with others, such as friends and family. In this study, Black girls sought and created communal spaces that allowed them to be their full emotional selves. This theme corroborates previous research highlighting Black girl spaces and friendships as central to Black girls' ability to feel supported and cared for (Bryant-Davis, 2013; Leath et al., 2022; Rogers & Butler-Barnes, 2021). Our study demonstrates the ways Black girls engaged in rituals (to engage the divine, commune with friends/family, and grieve) to make meaning of their lives and reclaim their agency. As Cahill (2021) wrote, "[r]ituals allow us to deepen our understanding of our heritage, our culture, and ourselves. They allow us to turn everyday routines into meaningful moments. By honoring and acknowledging our collective power, rituals become our sacred and healing practices" (p. xx). Rituals offer a way for Black girls to resist oppressive places and contexts (e.g., schools and families) that attempt to limit their full humanity's expression.

Participants' narratives underscored the need to foreground Black girls' voices as we develop literature on Black girls' wellness. Additionally, using a Black girl cartography perspective and photovoice can equip scholars with strategies to capture how Black girls make meaning of mental health and wellness. Photovoice permitted Black girls to document and construct stories about their lived experiences and forge new imaginative spaces while also negotiating the realities of those lived experiences. This study pushes the field of Black girlhood studies to incorporate participatory and visual methodologies that capture Black girls' voices, given their unique racialized and gendered experiences.

Implications for Research and Practice

Our study findings contribute to the growing scholarship on centering Black girls' mental health and wellness and creating space that provides an opportunity to share their lived experiences. Furthermore, our findings have implications for educators, practitioners, and youth-serving community organizations.

Regarding educators, our findings suggest the need to honor Black girls as the "knowers" of their own lives. Black girls deserve emotional support staff and systems (e.g., counselors, social workers, and mentors) that are culturally affirming, trauma-informed, and gender-responsive as they attend to Black girls' experiences with intersectional oppression (Leary, 2019). For instance, Rogers and Butler-Barnes (2021) found that in an all-girl school, Black girls wanted programming that valued them. Black girls also wanted school counselors who knew how to talk to Black girls, especially when they were going through personal issues, whether in school or at home. Therefore, emotional support staff and systems must be committed to creating programs and services that prioritize Black girls' wellness needs (Girls for Gender Equity, 2017; Leary, 2019; Morris, 2019).

Practitioners can also provide Black girls with services that center their needs by considering race, gender, and other social identities to promote wellness. For instance, Jones and Guy-Sheftall (2015) discussed how using Black feminist thought in providing therapy for Black

women is the key driver of the therapeutic process. Similarly, Black girl cartography offers an opportunity to understand the intersectional experiences of Black girls (Butler, 2018).

Regarding community youth-serving organizations, it would behoove these entities to promote culturally responsive programming that affirms Black girls' expression and identity development through critical literacies (Kelly, 2020a). For instance, Kelly (2020a) examined how Black girls' critical consciousness developed over time. The findings revealed that providing space led to resisting and reframing their narratives or artifacts through literacies (e.g., a poem or collage) helped Black girls become self-aware. To honor Black girls' voice, schools must intentionally create spaces that prioritize Black girls' thriving.

Schools and youth-serving organizations must create intentional spaces where Black girls can lead. One way this can be accomplished is through youth advisory groups (Simpkins et al., 2017; Sjogren & Melton, 2021). Sjogren and Melton (2021) found that youth advisory groups helped staff navigate some challenges in engagement in programming for minoritized youth. More direct efforts include equipping Black girls with the knowledge and skills to understand the research and work on policy initiatives that promote wellness and success for Black girls. For instance, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) Young Scholars Program provides an opportunity for Black girls to lead in developing programming and research skills to address their needs, while also addressing policy initiatives that impact their developmental competencies (AAPF Young Scholars Program, n.d.).

Finally, philanthropic organizations and research funding agencies must invest in Black girls' wellness. For example, the Black Girl Freedom Fund—a philanthropic initiative of Grantmakers for Girls of Color—is a strong example of investing in research that “supports work advancing the well-being of Black girls and their families, including work that centers and advances the power of Black girls and gender-expansive youth” (About Black Girl Freedom Fund, 2022). Likewise, other funders and agencies should invest in research prioritizing Black girls and gender-expansive youth.

Conclusion

Taken together, this study underscores the importance of listening, gaining knowledge, and supporting the meaning-making of Black girls in how they define their mental health and wellness. Finally, Black girls demonstrated their agency by creating collective spaces that enabled them to be emotionally expressive, make meaning, and thrive. As Nikky Finney (2009) declared, “Black girls know the answer to a world of questions, but no one is asking them” (p. xx). As fierce lovers and advocates of Black girls, we must ask them questions about their visions of a world where they are supported within the various contexts they navigate. We owe it to Black girls to engage in critical solutions focused on their mental health and wellness.

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